

Mozart: Wind Quintet in E-Flat Major – K. 452 (1784)

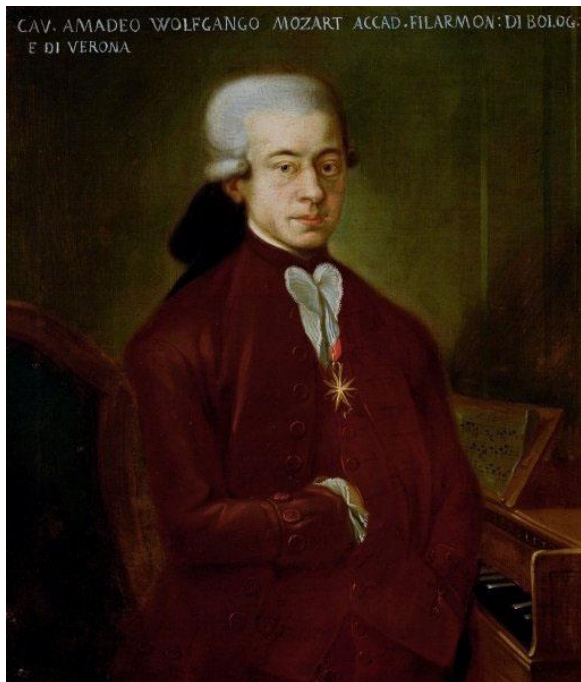
An ensemble comprising oboe, bassoon, clarinet, French horn, and piano brings to the table its own set of quirks which makes writing for this group of instruments simultaneously a difficult yet pleasurable task. Certainly by Mozart's time, the string analog to the wind quintet was already a standard mixture of instruments and voices; however Mozart was no stranger to experimenting with form and genre. Coming on the heels of three of his piano concerti (K. 449, K. 450, and K. 451), his K. 452 *Wind Quintet* is in essence, another exploration of the piano concerto form, this time in a chamber ensemble. Indeed, Mozart's early piano concerti are characterized by fairly superfluous wind parts, mostly doubling the strings and adding another layer of timbre to the orchestral setting. In K. 451, Mozart moved away from this style of writing and gave the wind parts more contrapuntal independence. Just a few weeks after its premiere, Mozart wrote to his father about an upcoming performance where he would perform the "best work [he had] ever produced": K. 452.

In K. 452, Mozart explores the virtuosic capabilities of the piano *alongside* the capabilities of each of these four instruments. In other words, one might think of K. 452 as a musical sandbox, a creative playground where Mozart flexed his contrapuntal chops and learned to develop his writing for each of these wind instruments. We can hear this reflected in the music in the first movement when each of the four woodwinds is given solo melodic passages accompanied by the piano and different combinations of the four are asked to play in duet. In the second movement we hear solo and duo winds bubbling out of the texture only to recede back into the gurgling brook of the ensemble. The rondo finale, also the longest movement, actually includes an extended written out cadenza for all five instruments, exploring the soloistic possibilities of each of the instruments in a *concertante* style. The style of writing had to be furthermore adapted to the technical capabilities and limitations of wind instruments, which cannot sustain indefinitely as strings can and which need to have pauses in which to breathe. Mozart's generic experimentation was finally complete by March 30, 1784, and the *Wind Quintet in E-Flat Major* was premiered on April 1, 1784, at the end of Lent, in Vienna's *Burgtheater*

The first movement, *Largo – Allegro moderato*, opens with *tutti* chords that resemble an orchestra tuning and getting revved up for their performance. In other words, one could describe the opening as a "crowd silencer," a term sometimes used to refer to the opening chords of Haydn's Op. 76 string quartets. Imagine a crowded room where the audience was all chatting, snacking, and otherwise enjoying themselves in a boisterous manner – the music, even in concerts, was rarely the center of attention. As music increasingly became the main attraction in concerts, composers like Haydn and Mozart sometimes decided to open their pieces with loud chords to grab the audience's attention (the jury still being out on whether or not their attention would remain on the music for its duration). Quiet audiences politely clapping as musicians made their way on stage would not be a mainstay feature of European concert culture until the late nineteenth century!

The opening movement continues with musical explorations of each instrument's *tessitura* and expressive range, with short melodic snippets being passed from one to the other, sometimes in duo or trio with each other. The piano undergirds the whole with a blanket of sound from which all the other instruments emerge and into which they recede. The middle movement, *Larghetto*, is

a nostalgic walk through the rain. The bassoon and French horn are given particularly soul-tugging melodies which pull you by the hand and take you on a journey to the past. The final rondo, *Allegretto*, is actually the longest movement of the three, and is marked by a quasi-improvisatory cadenza in which all five instruments explore the virtuosic register. Some of these techniques even find a home in his A-Major Clarinet Concerto, composed in 1791. Though experimental is not the first word that comes to mind when we think of Mozart today, that is perhaps one of the best ways to characterize his *Wind Quintet*, a work which allowed him to play with form, style, and instrumentation and through which he found his own voice in woodwind writing.



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Source – Wikimedia Commons



Ludwig van Beethoven
Source – Wikimedia Commons

Beethoven: Wind Quintet in E-flat Major, Op. 16 (1796)

In the year 1796, a twenty-seven-year-old Beethoven was still a budding composer and more renowned as a gifted pianist than as the author of massive symphonic works or epic string quartets. In this first stage of his life, he was greatly influenced and inspired by the works of his slightly older contemporaries, Mozart and Haydn. In the finale to his second symphony, he makes marked use of the ascending bassline omnibus progression, a clear nod to *Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes* (The Heavens are Telling the Glory of God) from Haydn's *Creation Oratorio*. Similarly, in his *Wind Quintet in E-flat Major*, Beethoven takes direct cues from Mozart's work in the same genre. Not only is the ensemble the same, but so is the key, and the overall form of three movements, starting with a slow introduction. One might even say that in starting the quintet in such a serious (*Grave*) tone, Beethoven was setting out to prove the gravity of his works to the public. Indeed, Beethoven published side by side with the wind quintet a version for piano and strings, underscoring the rare nature of this particular instrument configuration. The proof is in the pudding – “piano quintet” automatically implies a string quartet in conjunction with a piano, whereas “wind quintet” specifies the different instruments – the presence of piano is understood.

In both wind quintets performed today, we can see the composer grappling with the difficulties of writing for this ensemble, comprised of four very different instruments. Unlike a string quartet, where all four of the string instruments are of the same basic build, the wind quartet includes four disparate instruments: two double reeds, one single reed, and one (quasi-)brass. Mozart decided to use the wind quartet in conjunction with the piano in order to explore the sonorities of the individual instruments and their melodic capabilities. Beethoven, on the other hand, was already thinking their incorporation into a symphonic fabric. Whereas solo textures pervaded Mozart's work, Beethoven thinks of the ensemble as a cohesive unit, leaving the piano the greatest maneuvering room. One might even say that it is a piano concerto boiled down to its barest elements: a virtuosic pianist paired with a SATB ensemble as accompaniment.

Beethoven, though he may have been working off of Mozart's example with regards to the form of the work, certainly is not afraid to let his own compositional style shine through in his *Wind Quintet*. The piano is often given a contrasting position in the music vis à vis the winds, playing accompaniment as they play melody and vice-versa. The virtuosity of the pianist is second to none in this work, and Beethoven gives the pianist ample moments to shine as the center of attention.

The first movement, *Grave – Allegro ma non troppo*, opens in the style of a French Galant Overture, with unison chords in dotted rhythms, invoking the *chasse* (hunt) topos, as the hunting horn calls everyone together from their scattered places. The slow and serious introduction is followed by a rollicking *Allegro* (but not too happy, as Beethoven admonishes) in which it seems the piano and winds take a jaunty stroll through the wide forest. Every once in a while, the piano, almost as if an eager child, wanders off and flits through the branches until it is called back to the group by the wind ensemble.

The second movement, *Andante cantabile*, begins with an extended solo passage, setting the scene for the woodwinds to come in together and recommence the journey through the woods. The oboe starts with a dramatic monologue, extolling the virtues of nature, until the bassoon takes over and

waxes poetic. They are joined by the clarinet who cannot help but express their desire to see more of the beauty around them, and the French horn softly nods in agreement. In this movement, individual melodic interaction between the wind instruments is furthest explored, but the piano is never left far behind. Although the piano takes a backseat in this movement, the difficult passagework which forms the basis of its accompaniment is not to be understated. This *Andante* is, true to its name, a pensive walk through the forest in which thoughts are expressed and given a physical form.

The final movement, *Rondo – Allegro*, is a true hunt rondo in 6/8 time, with the primary theme recurring three times over as a refrain, between which are sandwiched secondary themes and variations. Although this movement includes a cadenza just as Mozart's finale, this time it is only for the piano. Rumor has it that in one early performance in which Beethoven himself was on piano, he spontaneously added to the cadenza, leaving his fellow musicians in the dust and continuously guessing as to when they could rejoin. Needless to say, they were not too happy about his antics. It seems Mozart was not the only composer with a sense of humor!

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley